

A true plural being – A life profile of P. R. Krishna Kumar

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Vaidya Krishna Kumar

Gurdjieff called man a plural being because he considered men as divided in themselves, with hundreds and thousands of “I”s. But only an extraordinary man can have many “I”s of uniquely diverse characteristic features, recognize and maintain a fine balance and successfully use them for the sake of the society. P. R. Krishna Kumar, the head of Arya Vaidya Pharmacy (Coimbatore) Ltd. is such a being, able to support a plurality of roles based on the strength of his inner unity. His daily life adorns the roles of an Ayurveda physician, teacher, visionary, philosopher, counselor, administrator and entrepreneur. The profound

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equilibrium that he maintains between these roles leads many to treat him as a sage, in the sense defined by Osho, one of his favorite spiritual leaders.

Spiritual, traditional and revolutionary, all at the same time – such is Krishna Kumar. This account is merely an elucidation of these adjectives from the perspective of his inseparable personal and professional lives.

Krishna Kumar was born in 1951 as the son of Arya Vaidyan P. V. Rama Varier, the founder of Arya Vaidya Pharmacy (AVP), and Smt. Pankajam Rama Varier. His father, Rama Varier, had been the only son of Vaidyavichakshanan Mankulangara Kunjan Varier, a reputed Sanskrit scholar, poet and physician. He became a trusted disciple of Vaidyaratnam P. S. Varier, and later a trendsetter in his own way, as evidenced by the establishment, growth and spread of AVP during his time. His deep knowledge, innate sincerity, humility and capacity for untiring hard work won for him the deep affection and trust of all those who came into contact with him. Even today, experts are surprised that Rama Varier could think of starting the company as a Public Limited Company. As early as the 1940s, globalization of Ayurveda was his vision and creating a new breed of physicians was his great desire.

Krishna Kumar naturally imbibed these finesses and even at a tender age used them on a larger platform, making his father proud. Living his life in total surrender to God, doing righteous things without expecting any return, and helping the poor are three qualities which he always attributes to his father. After studying at one of Kerala’s most prestigious schools, Shornur Ayurveda College, once run by the famous Ayurveda Samajam, he decided not to become a practitioner; instead, he took up the propagation of Ayurveda, particularly imparting proper Ayurveda education, as his main objective in life.

Despite not being a fully fledged practitioner, Krishna Kumar has introduced innovations that have made Ayurveda more effective. For example, in his Chikitsalayam in Coimbatore, he incorporated allied knowledge systems like Jyotish astrology in a holistic way to potentiate the effect

of Ayurveda treatment. The practical success of his holism has even convinced hardcore modern medical specialists, who rarely go beyond the rigid clinical algorithms of their training, to the extent of seeking Krishna Kumar's assistance to provide astrological consultations, and rituals like Dhanwantari Havan for some of their critically ill patients.

Though his acceptance of Jyotish astrology may appear to be blind, it does not define his attitude to traditional science. Krishna Kumar has always stood for scientific validation of Ayurveda, and incorporation of the best of modern science in both clinical practice and medicine production, particularly in the organizations that he heads, and that too, without compromising traditional standards. It was with this intention that he supported the creation of the AVT Institute for Advanced Research (AVTAR) to conduct clinical, literary, field and drug researches and to train aspiring Ayurveda scholars. The purpose of the institute is to "back up tradition with evidence".

Krishna Kumar had always felt that only a scientifically validated Ayurveda could achieve global acceptance. In his early 20s, he struck out on a road not traveled by Ayurveda in those days. He approached the office of the WHO representative in India to request steps to establish a global scientific footing for Ayurveda, but only received sarcasm for his pains, since the officials could see Ayurveda only as a form of "black magic". Continuing his fight for the cause, however, he eventually convinced them of its value and persuaded them to participate in the first clinical research on Ayurveda treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. This was started in 1977 under a WHO and ICMR partnership. Attracting appreciation and criticism from different corners, the study presented the only model available at the time. In recognition for that and his continued efforts to bring quality research to the field of Ayurveda, National Institutes of Health (NIH), USA, funded a clinical trial project recently through University of Washington (2004–2006). It was the very first time that such a study had been funded outside the USA. The trial was successful, and has been accepted for publication in indexed, peer-reviewed journals.

According to Krishna Kumar, "these are not individual or institutional milestones. Rather, they are those of the Science of Ayurveda in its journey of globalization". As far as Ayurveda is concerned, the "globalization" he refers to need not be taken in a negative sense, for he adds, "When it comes to a science, globalization without compromises helps it attain acceptability. On the other hand, efforts to market science as a commodity for the sake of globalization should always be deplored".

Krishna Kumar has successfully implemented a number of projects approved by the Department of Science and Technology and Department of Environment in various areas and topics related to Ayurveda. For example, his execution of a Department of Environment funded "All India Coordinated Project on the Ethnobiology of Tribals in the Western Ghats (1985–88)" was widely praised.

Being a strong representative of the great South Indian Ayurveda tradition has not prevented Krishna Kumar from promoting preventive medicine aspects of Ayurveda for health tourism in spite of inviting criticism from his peers. He has done so adhering to the *hita* (suitable) and *mita* (moderate) concepts in Ayurveda, rather than to theories of indulgence guiding the hospitality industry. Such treatment centers, run in association with leading hotel chains in nationally famous destinations, have thus remained centers of more authentic Ayurveda, rather than merely becoming profit-making ones.

In 1977, Krishna Kumar first conceived, and then implemented, a unique 7½ year Ayurveda course on the gurukula pattern, affiliated first to Madras University and later to Bharathiar University. The course helped students to experience holistic development through their way of life; it included components like spiritual practices and traditional martial arts, set in an environment conducive to learning in which students lived alongside their teachers. The curriculum which was successful and created a unique breed of Ayurveda scholars is now known in academic circles as the "Coimbatore Experiment". The course was provided to all students totally free of cost, despite being a huge financial burden on the then slowly growing mother institution. For Krishna Kumar, value-based education is his most basic and consistent interest in life, and he has spent considerable time and resources on its cause. Nine batches of students, totaling a little over 100 in number, completed the course since the first batch joined in 1986. Eventually, it had to be stopped due to adverse pressure from formal authorities.

As a great motivator, he always prefers the company of keen students. In this way, he continues his untiring pursuit of imparting education as he thinks fit. Krishna Kumar runs Arsha Yoga Vidya Peetham Trust in which half a dozen students recently studied Ayurveda for 8 years under a single Guru, again totally free of cost, without expecting certificates or the legal right to practice, but committed to evolve as wisdom banks. In his Divyam School of Values, students are initiated into informal learning of Indian sciences the traditional way, together with subjects they would otherwise learn in a conventional curriculum.

Krishna Kumar's perennial concern is with the quality of

Ayurveda students and lacunae in the learning process. He quotes Vivekananda: “There is a gross difference between the eastern and western sciences. The Indian seers, with their vision turned inward created analytical sciences, while other civilizations, like that of the Greeks, with their minds turned outward, created the sciences of generalization. This is a simple yet significant difference in the approaches of these types of science. A student without initial training or even interest in ‘looking within’ will experience cultural shock when faced with classical Ayurveda topics”.

Despite being the head of a leading Ayurvedic firm, Krishna Kumar supports a vaidya-centered approach, rather than a product-centered one. To him, the vaidya is a guardian, messenger and practitioner of authentic Ayurveda. He firmly holds that philosophical and cultural components are integral parts of Ayurveda, strongly opposing attempts at “de-philosophizing” made even in Kerala, a supposedly safe haven for the sastra. He says, “It is imperative to market our culture in order to succeed in taking our medicines abroad”, while pointing out how Ayurveda’s spread was supported by the popularity of yoga and meditation in the west. He has no doubt when he says that “to the loss or dilution of the cultural and value components in what we do as students and as physicians, we attribute the cause of entire crisis faced by Ayurveda”. To him, this is the major threat Ayurveda faces today.

With his matchless zeal, he is actively involved in many other pioneering activities: The Kshetropasana Trust founded together with noted spiritual leader Prema Pandurang, to revive and rejuvenate those values and ideals of Indian culture that have seemingly been forgotten in the modern era, and to uplift the weaker and downtrodden classes in society; and the Bharatamuni Foundation for Asian Culture, an organization created by the famous Natya Shastra artist Ms. Padma Subrahmanyam for research on cultural identities and to enhance dialog between scholars and Asian artists, both performing artists and those associated with puppet theater, painting and sculpture.

Presently, Krishna Kumar is the head of AVP and is involved in the production of quality medicines, and promotion of Ayurveda education, research and clinical services. He was instrumental in leading the company from

its humble beginning to its current status as one of India’s greatest traditional Ayurveda houses, a journey in which he has been supported by his siblings and their families. Krishna Kumar remains a bachelor as he is already wedded to the noble cause to which he is committed.

In recognition of his contributions to the field of Ayurveda, the Government of India conferred the prestigious “Padma Shri” award on him in 2009. In his words, it is “a recognition for Ayurveda”.

Many of Krishna Kumar’s works have been misunderstood, and many have met with failure. As Swami Vivekananda remarked, “each work has to pass through these stages – ridicule, opposition and acceptance. Those who think ahead of their time are sure to be misunderstood”. When his works are accepted, his past failures will be ours and not his, as all he conceived and implemented were actually not for him, but for others. The recent interest in reviving the gurukula pattern for Ayurveda education, shown by the same authorities who earlier destroyed it, is the latest example of acceptance that naturally follows ridicule.

Krishna Kumar sleeps but little; demanding schedules keep him active for almost 20 hrs each day. His long working hours, wide range of activities, and frequent travels in spite of health issues, would humble even a normal healthy person. He has traveled across the length and breadth of India and also outside with passionate commitments to his beliefs and representing Ayurveda. Like his father, he too maintains relationship with people from all walks of life.

Though he turns 60 this year, Krishna Kumar continues his journey with surprising ease, undeterred from his commitments, unaffected by success and failure, disease or other disturbances. A famous Sanskrit verse provides a comprehensive summary of his life–work and a suitable conclusion of this account of his personality, life and mission: “*Let the learned ridicule or appreciate, let wealth come or go, let death happen right now or ages later! Come what may, nothing can force a committed person to shift a step from the path of righteousness*”.

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